

ALTRE VOCI

OTHER VOICES

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ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

An Idea whose Time Has Come

“Why do we have to like them.....when they don't have to like us”
“Why do we have to respect themwhen they don't have to respect us
“Why do we have to learn about them when they don't have to learn about us”
... *Quote from Italian American first grader ...*

This angry statement by an Italian American first grade student, underscores the dilemma of Italian American schoolchildren. They are not included in the educational experience provided in our schools. While young Italian Americans are expected to be proud of their Italian heritage or to feel good about being Italian they are not given much reason to do so. If they accept the popular cultural images of Italians as presented in the media they cannot be expected to respect or care about their heritage.

Young Italian Americans need to experience their distinctive cultural roots as a positive force rather than a hurdle to overcome. Italian American kids really do not know much about who they are or where they came from. They suffer from the same lack of understanding about their cultural heritage that their parents do. They deserve better. Part of the problem lies in what our children are exposed to and not exposed to in the schools they attend.

Schools play a key role in exposing students to images and ideas about themselves. The history and literature taught in our schools as American focuses on the experiences of other ethnic groups, primarily those of Northern European ancestry or affirmative action groups; i.e. African, Hispanic, Asian or Native American. This does little to expand our childrens awareness of their place in this country or to strengthen their identity as Italian Americans.

Despite the fact that Italian Americans are the fifth largest group in the entire nation and have made enormous contributions to the progress of the nation, they are still not considered part of all this by our nations schools. Italian American children need to find value in their heritage as much as children from any other ethnic group. The message being received by Italian American kids is that their Italian heritage has less value than those cultures they are exposed to in the schools.

Today's school curriculum promotes the values and attitudes of other ethnic groups. As a result, our childrens educational experience is culturally biased. It also leaves a misleading impression of who the primary groups are that

have immigrated to this land and what distinctive cultural and historical role they have played. Most Americans are descendents of the groups left out of the school curriculum.

The lack of attention given to Italian Americans and other European and Mediterranean ethnic groups leaves an inaccurate impression that those groups are not culturally distinct - that only the affirmative action groups are. The result is an educational experience for Italian children that is separated from their reality, from truth, from equal history.

While a great deal of pressure was placed upon Italian Americans during much of this century to give up their cultural heritage - their language, their folkways, even their food - they are now being told that they must learn about and appreciate other peoples cultures. But that does not include the opportunity to learn about their own. That is about as unfair as you can get. And this unfairness is being promoted by our schools. This is a real injustice as far as Italian American children are concerned and needs to be corrected.

Italian American students are entitled to know about themselves and about the history and accomplishments of their people. They are as entitled as any group. That the need is there is undisputed. They too should be included in the story of this nation.

Earlier generations of Italian Americans faced the challenges of assimilation and forging a national Italian American identity. A challenge they successfully met. The challenge for this and future generations is to create their own ethnic identity. And Italian American studies are vital to the building of strong identities in young Italian Americans. There are those who would be more comfortable if we adopted their identity. But that is not possible.

Everyone has a history. And Italian Americans have a unique history. Our children deserve to learn about that history in school. But our schools are failing Italian American children in that regard. The current treatment of Italian Americans by our schools is at best discriminatory as reflected by their exclusion from the school curriculum. The challenge for this generation is to see that we are included.